The failure of the political centre ground

The EU and the rise of right-wing populism

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There is a no-man's-land between European post-democracy and notional national democracy that largely consists of grand coalitions of the political centre. It is here that European populism is flourishing and will continue to do so. Ulrike Guérot offers a corrective.

Throughout Europe – from Finland to Greece – right-wing populist parties have been mushrooming in recent times. The causes of this trend lie not least in the colossal breaches of democratic laws in the EU, as well as in the dominance of the economic aspect that resulted from the separation of financial and political spheres. [1]

These so-called populists have taken up arms against the EU. They are breaking up the classic party system and, as a result, contributing to the erosion of national democracies. Consequently, populism has generally been branded a threat to liberal democratic societies. Yet Europe’s populism problem is only secondary. Its biggest problem is the political centre ground.

For the political centre is unable – or unwilling – to denounce the EU as it currently exists as a violation of democracy. Nor has it felt obliged to develop the EU to become a true transnational democracy and, in doing so, concentrate its focus on the positive aspects of political and social integration within Europe. The EU is incapable of escaping its own state of self-denial. And that is Europe’s real problem.

European populism always has two faces. One is an anti-euro face, while the other targets migration and “foreign infiltration”. Both these faces unite Marine Le Pen with Viktor Orbán, the Finns Party (formerly “True Finns”) with the Freedom Party in Austria, or the Sweden Democrats with Geert Wilders. The AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) under the leadership of Bernd Lucke reckoned it could hide its ugly second face behind the professorial anti-euro face, until Frauke Petry and Björn Höcke went on to show the
party’s xenophobic face in public.

The anti-immigration face of Europe’s populists makes it easy for the political centre ground to take refuge in moral superiority. But this superiority blinds people to the fact that in their criticism of Europe, the populists have hit on a very sore point in the EU’s system of governance: the euro can work, but it is not democratic. The object of Marine Le Pen’s and her fellows’ criticisms, that is to say European post-democracy, is not especially original, and can be found as a straightforward factual criticism in pretty much every academic analysis by any respected political or social scientist. There are whole libraries showing that the euro has insufficient fiscal legitimacy and that European parliamentarianism is fragile. [2] The euro cannot guarantee social cohesion in Europe. And yet for decades we have refused to take this knowledge to our European parliaments. Anyone who says this out loud in a political context very soon runs the risk of being labelled a populist.

Pegida’s rather grubby slogan Wir sind das Volk (“We are the people”) reflects the fact for us all, in unpleasantly lurid fashion, that it is citizens, not states, who are sovereign: not in a plebiscitary sense, but it is they who, as a sovereign collective, legitimize our parliamentary representatives. If we follow Jan-Werner Müller’s theory of populism, [3] then daring to contradict the dominant view of national and European elites does not make you a populist. Likewise, Marine Le Pen’s legitimate criticism of current European policy does not in itself make her a populist or indeed an extremist.

**Simple moralism is no solution**

Instead of taking the causes of support for populist parties seriously – and acknowledging that behind it lie genuine reasons of systemic failure, resulting in social and cultural exclusion – the political class has often reacted in complacently moralistic fashion. The establishment’s own arguments are accorded an ethical superiority they do not deserve, and right-wing populists are labelled dishonest, wilfully irrational or dangerous while, at the same time, the needs of those who have lost out in the process of globalization are not recognized as the basis for a competing value system, or even a different political opinion.

The buzzword these days is “polarization”: if you don’t agree with the centre ground, you polarize. Thus other people’s arguments are not countered, but simply stripped of political merit, and the very basis of democratic discourse is swept away: it is bound to be eroded, once political arguments are not a priori of equal value and consensus is valued over disagreement. So the decline of democracy starts with the marginalization of populists.

None of this is intended to defend or even excuse the various statements of AfD cheerleaders such as Björn Höcke or André Poggenburg; nevertheless, it is worth raising the question of how they both managed, in Thuringia and Saxony-Anhalt respectively, to muster an impressive AfD vote of 15 or even 24 per cent. One reason is that things that are factually correct become unsayable and tarred with the populist brush. To give one relatively trivial everyday example, an attempt to set up an investigative committee in the European Parliament concerning the Juncker tax scandal failed: Die Linke and the Greens refused to join it, as they would have had to vote with the populist Right. [4]
Politicians to the gallows: Europe in a pre-revolutionary state

This is how we have long since reached a kind of pre-revolutionary state of affairs in Europe, without even noticing. The gallows in Dresden during the Pegida demonstrations symbolize this trend. Pre-revolutionary means people opposing the system because they refuse to accept the notion that there is no alternative to the political status quo or to its veiled corruption and cavalier attitude to the law. This is exactly what is currently happening all over Europe. The surge in support for populist parties has now reached a level - albeit fluctuating from country to country - of roughly 30 per cent. Where there is a de facto absence of opposition to the EU and no possibility of reversing its decisions, all that remains, on both right and left, is to take refuge in criticism of the system and the establishment of new parties. This is precisely what the renowned American economist Albert O. Hirschman had already formulated in 1970 as “exit, voice, loyalty”. Once you can no longer remain loyal to a system (“loyalty”) and your own voice is no longer being heard (“voice”), you have no choice but to leave the system (“exit”). Whoever is opposed to current EU policy must be against the EU system. And more and more people are opposed to that policy. It isn’t populism threatening the EU, but the EU that is giving rise to European populism. Where the EU’s policies are presented as if there were no alternative, it provokes hostility to Europe in general. The EU’s elections to the European Parliament, in its post-democratic state, present us with something that is formally democratic but of no real effect. The EU does not keep the basic functional promise of a democracy, which always has to be able to offer an alternative.

What’s more: at the same time, the EU is destroying functioning democracies at a national level, by depriving states of central social regulatory mechanisms - for instance through the so-called “European Semester” and budgetary controls. Make no mistake: in the no-man’s-land between European post-democracy and notional national democracy that largely consists of grand coalitions of the political centre, European populism is flourishing and will continue to do so.

So European populism has a genuine basis in fact that the political centre ground is not prepared to accept, never mind systemically correct. The largest breeding ground for the present hostility to foreigners now being stoked by the European refugee drama is – aside from inveterate neo-Nazis and xenophobes - the persistent, post-democratic European mismanagement that has led to a social crisis of unknown proportions and disenchantment with politics on an unheard-of scale. In this context, Frank Richter alludes to Hans-Joachim Maaz’s classic concept of “pent-up feelings of resentment” and stresses that marginalization or condescension (for instance, referring to “the mob” [as SPD leader Sigmar Gabriel did in August 2015 when referring to anti-migration protesters]) is no solution. Surprisingly enough, “left-wing conservatives” have recently made similar arguments and cited the rise of the populist Right as symptomatic of a failure in pragmatic policy-making.

The increasingly socially unsettled middle classes are now becoming easy prey for the sirens of racist slogans - in Finland and Germany, in the Netherlands and in France - because their own civil, social and political rights have been trampled underfoot. When rotten systems collapse, it generally happens faster than people expect. And it is always
underestimated, how pitilessly people who were never able to profit from the system then facilitate its collapse. One should not expect many tears to be shed over the EU – and those that are shed will likely be crocodile tears.

Meanwhile empirical studies have shown a clear correlation between poverty and turnout at elections: poor people don’t vote. And unfortunately, not without reason: elections offer no real political alternative anymore, and so no hope of realistically improving one’s own life, which means that the socially disenfranchised, in particular, no longer bother to vote at all. In his book *The Society of Equals*, French sociologist Pierre Rosanvallon sums up the problem when he writes that, in a democracy, what counts more than formal participation is social equality. He recalls the axiom of the French Revolution “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité”: freedom is only possible together with equality. [8] When formal democracy is offered, but the social question is not resolved or society’s promise of equality not kept – at least up to a point – the democratic system has failed, because it is no longer fulfilling the role it is there to perform.

It has, by now, been comprehensively documented that the disparity in incomes and especially the spreading imbalance of wealth is growing larger and larger. [9] This is common knowledge. But what is even more important than participation in democracy is the maintenance of social bodies. The solution to these problems does not chiefly lie in demonizing Pegida demonstrators, Freedom Party or Front National voters, but in shaping democratic European conditions and a socially acceptable policy in Europe – across the board.

**The failure of the EU**

The EU, as it stands, is incapable of bringing about this solution, being unable to dictate either a social or a structural policy. What it does is largely reduced to the implementation of a single market. As such, the EU cannot even conceive of the vocabulary, never mind the practicality of a policy with a social conscience. Nor does it even have the means for such a thing, constrained as it is by a budget of approximately 0.9 per cent of Europe’s overall GDP – a pitiful fraction of the total.

Thanks to a single market policy concerned largely with concepts of structural reform, efficiency, growth and competitiveness, and which entails the distributions of structural funds on a per capita basis, it is above all the rural regions across Europe that turn out to be the fall guys in the European value chain. With a few exceptions, [10] these regions end up as charity cases.

Europe’s social problem is for the most part a problem of city versus countryside and of the centre versus the periphery. [11] In largely deserted rural areas, often affected by industrial despoliation, there are often particularly large numbers of people voting for the populist Right – from Ukip to Austria’s Freedom Party (FPÖ) to the Front National in France. Ukip scores particularly heavily in the de-industrialized north of England, the Front National in the so-called centres péri-urbains, the structurally weak regions of France, and the FPÖ in Styria and Lower Austria. The one-sided philosophy of the single market, which forms the basis of the EU as it is today, effectively pushes these mostly rural-based losers in the process of globalization into the hands of the populists.
The pressure of the European austerity regime and the resurgent populist Right have pushed those countries affected towards nationalism, as we have long been able to observe in Hungary, France and Poland – and not only in those countries. Where national political systems are no longer able to control the challenge from populist tendencies, and where moreover national politics have been hugely constricted, particularly in the spheres of economic and social policy, whole systems have seen a shift to the right and entire countries have succumbed to the temptations of simplistic solutions, nationalistic fantasies or else grand coalitions that persist for years on end.

Even in 2012, Nicolas Sarkozy tried to outflank Marine Le Pen in the French presidential election by tacking to the right. He will probably attempt the same tactic in 2017. It is a similar story with the Austrian People’s Party, and some of the German Christian Democrats have long flirted with positions of the AfD. The results of the latest German state elections have shown how far the political landscape has shifted in a comparable direction, and provide a foretaste of what potentially awaits in the 2017 federal elections.

**Grand coalitions - the last “lifeline” of the political centre ground**

As a result, grand coalitions have generally become the – last – lifeline of the political centre ground in the countries that are in the eurozone and therefore cannot escape the fatal euro policy. As for the others, total national isolation has become an option (see Hungary, Poland and the majority of eastern European countries), as has leaving altogether (see the United Kingdom). Where European democracy is not a political option on offer, the nationalist fiction that “we’re better off alone” remains.

At the same time we have lost all conceptual clarity of what is actually meant by democracy. Concepts such as “authoritarian” and “legitimate” are relative, and so have become almost arbitrary. Legitimate always used to be a word that characterized democracies – in contrast to authoritarian regimes – whereas authoritarian regimes were viewed as illegitimate. [12] We perceive Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and the new Polish government, as undemocratic – which they indeed are, given that in Poland central constitutional principles are now being annulled, such as the independence of the constitutional court or the freedom of the press, just as they were previously in Hungary. And yet these governments were elected by the majority. So what do we do with elected autocrats who suppress their opponents?

As long as we cling to the principle of national sovereignty in Europe and do not pursue a true democratic union, the EU can complain about developments of this sort all they like, as they did at the recent Constitutional Tribunal, but ultimately they cannot change anything about the de facto dismantling of democratic and constitutional conditions. And so the EU and the nation-states continue to heap misery upon one another.

Because we have lingered for too long in a political situation that is neither one thing nor the other, the necessary social basis to shape a political Europe has long since been eroded. The pro-European majority is diminishing, if it has not already been lost. Indeed, a democratic Europe is not even on offer at the moment, only more and more EU and more integration, so more of the same. Referendums are feared. A long overdue reform of the European treaties is not in prospect. Meanwhile the EU interferes with nation-states
that increasingly want nothing to do with it. Consequently we are losing democracy on a national level without having ever achieved it at a European level. In short: democracy is currently being vaporized in the political vacuum between EU and nation-states.

**New generations, or: Populism raises its children**

As if this self-reinforcing, almost mechanical effect were not bad enough as it is, we can observe a depressing generational dynamic at work on top of this, which has led to a state of affairs where young elites, particularly but not exclusively in eastern Europe, are verging on the historically illiterate: they never internalized the European spirit of the authors of the European treaties (“ever closer union”). That is not, and never was, their aim.

Besides, populism is raising its children in the East, and making a better fist of it than the liberal democracies in the West. Anyone who has had the dubious pleasure of talking to the Orbán acolytes of the Fidesz party will know what I am talking about. To think that some people claim that classical brainwashing no longer works today! Or that some claim young people in Hungary have been schooled in critical theory…! Poland is probably now facing the same fate, except it is likely to be far more rapid and obvious. Soon we can expect young people in Poland no longer to know what Europe actually is, or was once supposed to be, such is the incessant hum of propaganda from the nationalistic press and their upbringing.

Their powerlessness in the face of such self-perpetuating processes is making even the founder members of the European project meek and tentative. In France the courage of European convictions has long since ebbed away. Even in the Netherlands one in four people wants to leave the EU. That leaves 75 per cent of the Dutch who don’t want to leave, but the political class in Holland is looking nervously at those 25 per cent of naysayers. The Dutch Vice-President of the European Commission Frans Timmermans, in his address on the occasion of the Dutch assuming the presidency of the Council of the European Union at the beginning of 2016, put it like this: “European where necessary, national where possible.” It all sounded so different in the 1990s.

But the latest “renationalization” is also taking place under pressure from right-wing populists. And the EU as it exists in reality offers the likes of Geert Wilders, Marine Le Pen and Heinz-Christian Strache enough of a target. Nation-states alone are responsible for social redistribution through social security contributions, and the same goes for wage calculations and the drafting of industrial relations. Hence in Greece and elsewhere the banks could be saved, but not the citizens. A European system of unemployment insurance, [13] which could most importantly have cushioned the blow of the calamity in Greece and provided a buffer to absorb the structural interventions necessary there, is inconceivable in the EU system as it stands. Squashed between a currency that cannot be devalued and European savings measures, wage cuts, tax increases and radical cuts in social benefits were – supposedly – the only way to bring about an unappealing cure. It has been clear for some time that this has not worked, either economically or socially, across the whole of southern Europe.

The greatest danger for Europe would be for the political middle ground to continue collectively pretending that this situation doesn’t exist. The real failure lies in not looking
closely enough – and simply carrying on as before. The pre-revolutionary potential of populism is belittled, or morally discredited. As a result, the long-term destabilization of the European system of party politics is blithely accepted, in the hope that European populism will just melt away if only the EU would generate a few more percentage points of growth – not a prospect that is on the economic horizon in any case. With this attitude, Europe may be digging its own grave.

**Long live Europe, long live the republic**

Without fundamental reform towards more democracy, the EU will not stand a chance. The problem is merely that there is no real political opposition in the EU and that decisions can effectively no longer be reversed. EU policy is largely made without any corrective. The much-invoked “ politicization” has hardly materialized and the path towards it has been systemically botched.

The European Parliament is not remotely in a position to politicize itself, something frequently hoped for in European discourse. It almost always has to vote in a “grand coalition”, that is to say across parties, in order to be able ever to defy the European Council and its national vetoes, because a two-thirds majority is required to outvote the European Council. So the European Parliament is largely “ depoliticized” and in over 90 per cent of votes forms majorities of 70 per cent or more in order to outvote the European Council. And the same problem can be observed on an economic level: as long as the eurozone is not conceived and understood as an integrated single economy with a collective GDP, the consequences of the eurozone cannot be overcome democratically and in a way that is equal and socially balanced for all European citizens. What is imperative is to allow all citizens of the euro area to enjoy a fair share of the aggregated profit of the eurozone. [14]

For this to be achieved we need, more than anything, a transnational parliamentary democracy in which all citizens are put on an equal footing, politically – i.e., in electoral terms – and in the eyes of the law – as regards tax law and access to social rights. Otherwise nations and their citizens will continue to be pitted against each other, as is currently the case in the EU – with the predictable consequence of a further rise in support for populist right-wing parties.

For we have a currency area within which unequal social standards are in operation, with unequal taxes, wages and social rights. So after the introduction of the euro, the single currency still has to be properly established. That is to say: the euro can work without political union, but it won’t be democratic, merely post-democratic as it is now.

Every truly democratic union has to be founded on the political and civic equality of its citizens. But the nation-states cannot, as things stand, vouchsafe the equality of all citizens in Europe. This is the grand delusion of the “United States of Europe”. And that’s why more integration is not the solution.

No: Europe must be turned upside down, on its head, and comprehensively reconceived according to the principle of the equality of all its citizens. Only political and civic
equality has the potential to stabilize the European system in the long term, and so put an end to its de facto erosion. But that can only succeed through a system of European citizenship for all citizens - in a combined, post-national European republic.

Footnotes

1. This article is based on Warum Europa eine Republik werden muss! Eine politische Utopie ["Why Europe must become a republic: a political utopia"], the author's latest book, which has just been published by Dietz.

2. The literature on this subject is almost bewildering in its extent. For those wishing to familiarize themselves with the topic, I would therefore confine myself to the following recommendations: Wolfgang Streeck, Buying Time, trans. Patrick Camiller, Verso, 2014; Fritz Scharpf, "Das Dilemma der supranationalen Demokratie" ["The dilemma of supranational democracy"], in Leviathan, 1/2015; Jürgen Habermas, "Warum der Ausbau der Europäischen Union zu einer supranationalen Demokratie nötig und wie er möglich ist" ["Why the European Union must be upgraded to a supranational democracy and how this can be done"], in Leviathan, 4/2014, 524-39; Claus Offe, Europe Entrapped, Polity, 2015; Fritz Scharpf, "Deliberative Demokratie in der europäischen Mehrebenenpolitik" ["Deliberative democracy in Europe's multi-layered politics"], in Leviathan, 2/2015, 155-66.


4. Here, the aesthetic principle "form follows function" has been broken: it is form, not function, that dictates policy in the EU. This is where the struggle to recapture Europe's political aesthetic must start.

5. The first books featuring the concept of a "European revolution" in their title are now available -- cf. Peter Trawny, Europa und die Revolution ["Europe and the revolution"], Matthes & Seitz, 2015. Revolution -- from the Latin revolvere -- literally means "rolling back", as in rolling something back to its origins.

6. Manfred Güllner of the Forsa Institute makes the following distinction, in an appearance on Deutschlandfunk on 2 January 2016: he claims that the real problem is less the four per cent of radical anti-democrats who need to be decisively opposed -- even more so, when some are now openly calling for people to be shot at our borders -- but frustrated non-voters. However, the act of voting is anonymous. This gives radical anti-democrats the chance and the stage to give many disappointed and embittered voters a chance to make a protest.

7. Cf. Frank Richter's excellent speech at the discussions in Karlsruhe's Centre for Applied Cultural Sciences and General Studies (ZAK) on 21 February 2016; cf. also the latest debate including philosophers such as Peter Sloterdijk and Rüdiger Safranski in Cicero, 1/2016 and 2/2016, as well as Albrecht von Lucke, "Der Triumph der AfD" ["The triumph of the AfD"] in Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik, 3/2016, 5-8.

9. Rosanvallon, op. cit., cites telling figures from France suggesting that the wealth imbalance is now the same as it was in 1913. In Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the 20th Century* (Harvard University Press, 2014), a series of long and detailed figures can be found on disparities in wealth and income in industrialized countries. Walter Wüllenweber, *Die Asozialen: Wie Ober- und Unterschicht unser Land ruinieren* ("The antisocial ones: How the upper and lower classes are ruining our country"), DVA, 2012, is also informative. Official figures can be found in the annual German Poverty Report (www.armuts-und-reichtumsbericht.de), although their account is regularly accused of whitewashing the data; the OECD also points to the stark increase in wealth imbalances, particularly in Germany (cf. "Vermögen in Deutschland besonders ungleich verteilt", *Die Zeit*, www.zeit.de/wirtschaft/2015-05/oecd-vermoegen-deutschland-sozialeungleichheit, 21 May 2015).

10. Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, Alsace in France and a few prosperous regions of northern Italy are, from a pan-European point of view, the exception to the rule.

11. On the accumulation of European industrial clusters, specifically in Germany -- something that among other factors results from Germany’s exposed central situation in Europe -- cf. the relevant illustration in *Warum Europa eine Republik werden muss!* The map of France as depicted there shows the correlation between unemployment and the Front National vote in France. For the correlation between relatively deserted rural areas and the Ukip vote, cf. John Springford, "Disunited Kingdom: Why 'Brexit' endangers Britain's poorer regions", Centre for European Reform, April 2015, www.cer.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2015/pw_disunited_js_april15-11076.pdf


13. As officially suggested by the EU in 2014 via the Hungarian Commissioner for Social Affairs László Andor; and only raised again in early 2016 by Matteo Renzi. On this too a wide range of literature has been available for years, e.g. the study by the Centre for European Policy (CEP): "Europäische Arbeitslosenversicherung. Ein wirkungsvoller Stabilisator für den Euroraum?" ["European unemployment insurance: An effective stabilizer for the Eurozone"], Matthias Kullas and Klaus-Dieter Sohn, Brussels, April 2015, www.cep.eu, as well as the (early) papers by Sebastian Dullien, "Eine Arbeitslosenversicherung für die Eurozone" ["A system of unemployment insurance for the Eurozone"], SWP-Studien, 1/2008.

14. This line of argument assumes that it is possible to balance out the long-term differences in the productivity and economic performance of states, nations and regions across Europe through political and legal changes and reforms, and that the will exists to do so.

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